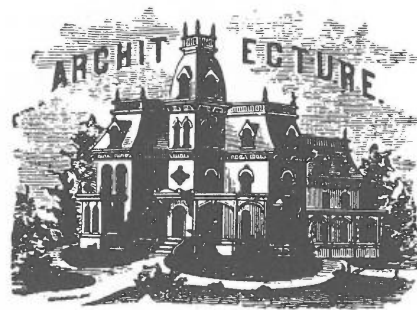


# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



## James Overlock 1813-1906

In December, 1851, an Augusta newspaper contained the following description of Thomaston, then a prospering shipbuilding community on the St. George River:

The principal street is wide, long and straight, lined with handsome houses and stores. Several new edifices have been built in the past season, amongst them one house of the Italian style, built by Captain Creighton, struck us as the handsomest house we have seen in the State of Maine.<sup>1</sup>

As was typical in small communities during the mid-nineteenth century, these houses were designed primarily by the builders who constructed them. The Creighton House, as well as many other residences erected in Thomaston during the 1840s and 1850s, was the work of one man, James Overlock.

Overlock's training was typical for coastal communities. Born in Waldoboro in 1813 of German decent, he apprenticed as a ship carpenter and house joiner in his native town. In 1836 he moved to Thomaston to work for Robert Thaxter Cushing, whose occupation included shipbuilding as well as house construction.<sup>2</sup> After Cushing's death in 1840,

Overlock established his own business as a house builder.<sup>3</sup> This limited knowledge of his early career provides little information regarding how he achieved success as a "joiner".<sup>4</sup> It is significant that by 1860 Overlock's personal wealth was greater than other individuals involved in the building trades and equal to that of the most prosperous citizens of Thomaston.<sup>5</sup>

The houses attributed to James Overlock derive their distinction more from exterior ornamentation than from an innovative arrangement of internal spaces.<sup>6</sup> Overlock's exploitation of the latest advances in woodworking machinery enabled him to exhibit a special flair for decorative treatment, particularly in the Italianate style. Jig saws and circular saws, which were available locally by 1853, provided access to elaborately fashioned mass-produced moldings which could be applied to both exteriors and interiors.<sup>7</sup>

The traditional house plan, consisting of a central hall with a parlor and sitting room on either side, was used in Overlock's own house and the residence of Robert Walsh, both built on Knox Street in 1855. The brackets, dentils, pedimented dormer, quoins, and Palladian window with a balcony illustrate the classical antecedents of Italianate design (Figures 1



Figure 1. Robert Walsh House, Thomaston, c. 1870 View (Courtesy Sally Hill).

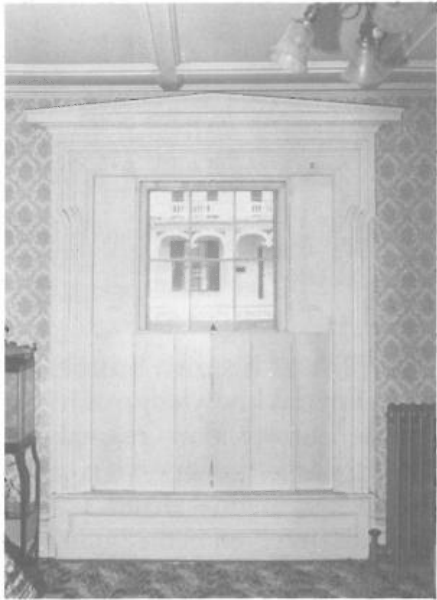


Figure 2. Parlor Window, James Overlock House, Thomaston, 1985 View (MHPC).

and 8). Ornamentation is often arranged with a boldness that suggests a certain naivete. This is especially evident in the window treatment for one of the formal rooms in the Overlock House in which a standard size double-hung sash receives a massive pedimented enframement (Figure 2).

The George Elliot House, built circa 1860, demonstrates how, in the age of machine-made moldings, the quantity and large scale of decorative trim was often the chief method of displaying a client's means (Figure 3). There is little regard for architectonic

principles in the way the attic gable does not tie into the cornice to form a true pediment. Similarly, the long second story balcony is supported on two bay windows and two Ionic columns, a solution more practical than academically correct. This approach, however, is the source of much of the charm and originality of Overlock's work. A larger variation of the Elliot House was built for William Stetson in 1856 (Figure 4).

A second Overlock house type is typified by the residences of James Creighton (cited in the 1851 newspaper account), Alpheus Sherman, and Alexander McCallum. Here a more distinctive floor plan dictated a marked change in the exterior appearance. James Overlock developed his own signature for Italianate style houses in the unusual porch brackets. Large curvilinear members linking the posts were standard (Figure 5). Other characteristic features included matched board siding, brackets and small cornices over each window. The room arrangement, as typified by the McCallum House of 1854, has been termed by one architectural historian as the "back hall plan" (Figure 6).<sup>8</sup> Basically, it consists of a large double parlor in the narrow gable end facing the street with the main entrance and staircase located perpendicular behind this room and parallel to the road. To the right of the hall is another formal room, probably the library, while behind that follows the dining room, kitchen and connected carriage barn. An additional first floor room, perhaps intended as a bedroom, occupies the remaining space behind the staircase and parlor.



Figure 3. George Elliot House, Thomaston, c. 1870 View (Courtesy Sally Hill).



Figure 4. William Stetson House, Thomaston, c. 1870 View (Courtesy Sally Hill).



Figure 5. Alexander McCallum House, Thomaston, c. 1870 View (Courtesy Sally Hill).

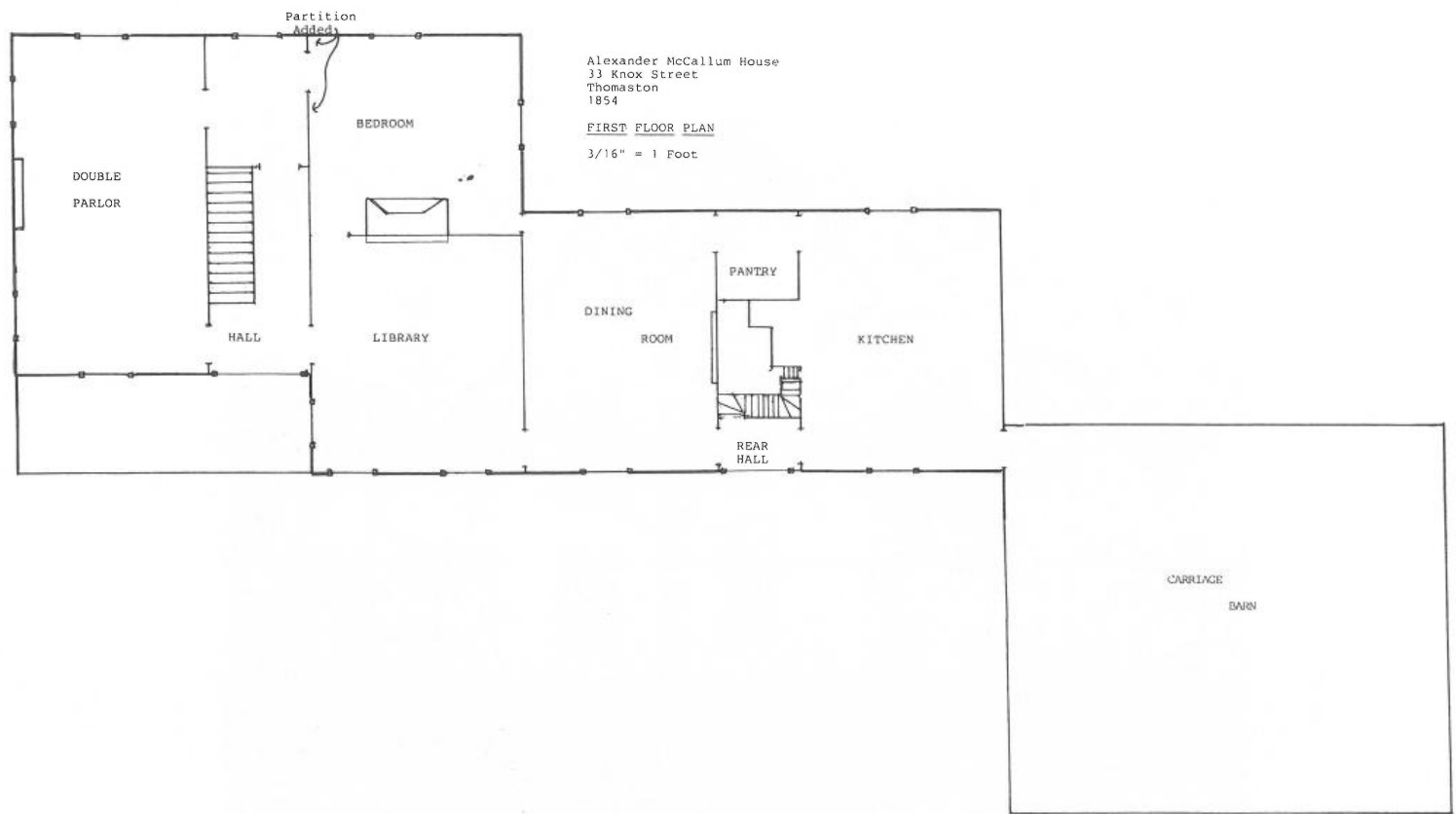


Figure 6. McCallum House, First Floor Plan (Author).

The origins of this plan have not yet been established, although it seems to have been largely confined to the Kennebec River Valley and to Thomaston during the period 1830-1860. Examples are found in Overlock's town as early as the 1830s. Thus the Thomaston builder was clearly following local tradition when he used the back hall plan for the Greek Revival style houses of George Washburn in 1848 and William Flint, Jr. in 1850 (Figure 7). Changes in this plan from the Flint House to the McCallum House probably derived from new concepts of living arrangements that became popular in the 1850s. For example, the Flint House has two separate rooms in the front rather than a large double parlor. Moreover, the main entrance faces the street and is perpendicular to the staircase, which eliminates the well-lighted room to the rear of the hall found in the McCallum House. Thus, for Overlock's Italianate style houses room arrangements became more spacious, in keeping with Victorian concepts of domestic design.

The only house attributed to Overlock which varies from the two basic plans discussed above is the Captain James Creighton House of 1851. Although now largely replaced with clapboard, the exterior was originally entirely sheathed in flush-board siding.

The interior is a marked variation to the back-hall plan, with a staircase perpendicular rather than parallel to the main entrance, creating more of a reception hall. The large double parlor, the library and the sitting room are located off the hall in a manner which creates a particularly strong feeling of open space. In addition, the interior moldings are richer and include plaster decorations.

The financial panic of 1857, which affected business throughout the country, had a negative impact on Thomaston. Shipbuilding, the mainstay of the local economy, began a decline from which it never recovered.<sup>9</sup> The lime industry, which was crucial to nearby Rockland, enabled that port to become the center of industry in Knox County. Perhaps it was this change in the economy that led Overlock to abandon his house building for a lumber business about 1868. He engaged in this enterprise until his death in 1906.<sup>10</sup> Although his career as a house builder ended early in his long life, Overlock's impact on Thomaston was considerable in shaping the architectural character of that coastal community (Figure 8).<sup>11</sup>

Roger G. Reed  
August, 1985



Figure 7. William Flint, Jr. House, Thomaston, 1855 View (Courtesy Mr. & Mrs. Michael Strong).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel Banner and Maine Family Visitant*, Augusta, December 27, 1851, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> James Overlock obituary, *Rockland Courier-Gazette*, July 7, 1906, p. 6. "James Overlock", *American Series of Popular Biographies*, Boston, 1905, p. 316.

<sup>3</sup> *History of Thomaston, Rockland and South Thomaston, Maine*, Cyrus Eaton, Hallowell, 1865, Vol. I, p. 197. Eaton states that Cushing died "on the Mississippi".

<sup>4</sup> Overlock is most commonly identified in deed transfers as a "joiner", although there are also references to him as a "house builder". He is also listed as a joiner in the 1850 and 1860 censuses. By the mid-nineteenth century distinctions between the trades of carpentry and joinery had become blurred. This coincided with an increasingly widespread use of the terms "builder" and "architect".

<sup>5</sup> The 1850 Federal census values Overlock's personal wealth at \$1,500. By 1860 he is listed as having \$4,500 in real estate and personal wealth of \$9,700. Among the 99 carpenters and 24 joiners also listed in Thomaston in 1860, the most wealthy besides Overlock are John Hill, valued at \$3,600 (real estate) and \$7,000 (personal) and LeRoy Copeland, valued at \$1,700 (real estate) and \$5,500 (personal). More typical for Overlock's income range is Rufus Conce, "gentleman", with \$7,000 (real estate) and \$4,400 (personal). It is interesting to note that Overlock often held mortgages on the houses he built for people.

<sup>6</sup> There is no firm documentation linking Overlock to the design of any houses in Thomaston. The principal source is an article by Samuel Green, "The Architecture of Thomaston,

Maine", published in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 10, No. 4, December, 1951. Green's source for Overlock's work was James Overlock, a grandson. He also talked to Mrs. Robert Walsh, a decendent of George K. Washburn, whose house was built by Overlock in 1848. Green's information has been combined with property transfers, which in several cases cite Overlock as the builder of a particular residence, and stylistic comparisons, which provide strong links both in the use of exterior ornamentation and in the design of the framing system where it is visible in the attics.

<sup>7</sup> Eaton, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 427.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Clancey, who has studied the development of vernacular nineteenth century floor plans throughout Maine, has identified the back-hall plan and its concentration along the Kennebec River Valley. Mr. Clancey's research has not yet identified the earliest example of this plan.

<sup>9</sup> Eaton, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 438-440.

<sup>10</sup> *The New England Business Directory* of 1865 lists Overlock as a carpenter and builder. By 1868 he is a lumber dealer, according to the *Rockland, Belfast, Camden, and Thomaston Directory* for that year.

<sup>11</sup> Thomaston newspaper notices indicate that Overlock's lumber yard, which was located behind his house, retailed "a large assortment of lumber of all kinds and dimensions, pickets, shingles, laths, etc." *Thomaston Herald*, May 10, 1878.





Figure 8. Four House by James Overlock (left to right): E.S. Caunce, 1854; Alexander McCallum, 1854; Alpheus Sherman, 1854; James Overlock, 1855, 1985 View (MHPC).

### LIST OF BUILDINGS ATTRIBUTED TO JAMES OVERLOCK

First James Overlock House, 26 Knox Street, Thomaston, c. 1841, Extant.  
 George K. Washburn House, 28 Knox Street, Thomaston, 1848, Extant.  
 William Flint, Jr., House, 30 Knox Street, Thomaston, 1850, Extant.  
 James Creighton House, 73 Main Street, Thomaston, 1851, Extant.  
 James Henderson House, 55 Main Street, Thomaston, c. 1851, Extant.  
 Captain E. S. Counce House, 31 Knox Street, Thomaston, 1854, Altered.  
 Joseph W. Jacobs House, 21 Gleason Street, Thomaston, 1854, Altered.  
 Alexander McCallum House, 33 Knox Street, Thomaston, 1854, Extant.  
 Bradford Oliver House, 17 Dunn Street, Thomaston, c. 1854, Extant.

Alpheus Sherman House, 35 Knox Street, Thomaston, 1854, Extant.  
 J. Sweetland House, Sprucehead Road, South Thomaston, 1854, Extant.  
 William Hewes House, 60 Main Street, Thomaston, 1855, Extant.  
 Robert Walsh House, 39 Knox Street, Thomaston, 1855, Extant.  
 Second James Overlock House, 37 Knox Street, Thomaston, 1855, Extant.  
 William Boggs House, Route 131, Warren, c. 1855, Extant.  
 A. Merriam House, 10 West Street, Rockport, c. 1855, Extant.  
 H. Verrit House, 10 School Street, Rockland, c. 1855, Extant.  
 Timothy Williams House, 38 Old County Road, Rockland, c. 1855, Altered.  
 William Stetson House, Knox Street, Thomaston, 1856, Destroyed.  
 John P. Cole House, 75 Main Street, Thomaston, between 1857-1863, Extant.  
 George Elliot House, 2 Elliot Street, Thomaston, c. 1860, Extant.

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